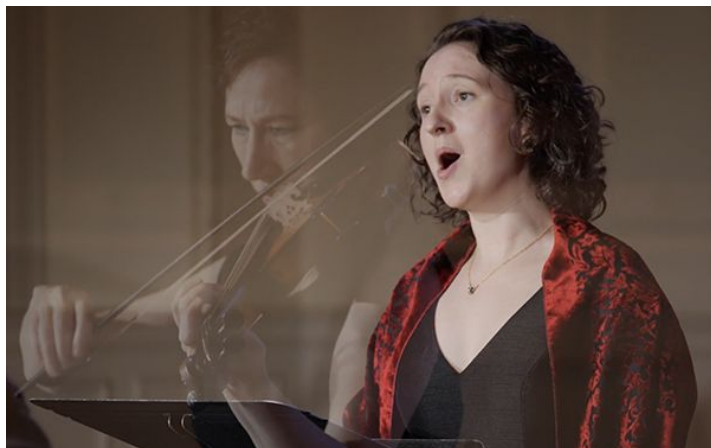


Christmas with Les Délices: “Noel, Noel” (debut Dec. 10)

by Timothy Robson



Les Délices premiered another winner this weekend with the debut of their pre-recorded Christmas concert “Noel, Noel,” a highly enjoyable blend of English, French, and German carols, interspersed with Christmas-themed poetry from authors as diverse as Christina Rossetti and e.e. cummings. (The program is available until December 23. Click [here](#) for tickets.)

Earlier in the year Les Délices had put out a call to local poets to submit Christmas poems for this concert. Three were chosen: Diane Kendig’s *At the Christmas Tree*, Dave Lucas’ *Three Kings*, and Julie Warther’s *one child’s candle*. The styles are diverse, from Kendig’s sonnet to Warther’s six haiku miniatures.

Veteran Cleveland radio and television personality Dee Perry is the reader, showing great sensitivity to each of the texts, and adding simple hand gestures to enhance their meaning. The overall organization of the concert is reminiscent of a “lessons and carols” service.

Christina Rossetti’s *Christmas Eve* opens the concert, followed by a medley of French *Noels en trio* arranged by Michel-Richard de Lalande for the instrumental ensemble: Debra Nagy, oboe and recorders, Julie Andrijeski and Allison Monroe, violins, Rebecca Reed, viola da gamba, and Mark Edwards, chamber organ.

In the 17th and 18th centuries the French carols (Noels) were highly popular with the general public, and numerous composers made arrangements of them, often with virtuosic variations. De Lalande’s settings are straightforward. e.e. cummings’ iconic *a little tree* is followed by three more Noels sung with sensitivity and purity by soprano Elena Mullins.

The first of the Ohio poems, Diane Kendig's *At the Christmas Tree*, opens a set of old English carols, some of which were arranged by Debra Nagy and Les Délices. Mullins gives an austere performance of the *Coventry Carol*, which adds instruments as the stanzas progress, but ending with soprano alone. The variations of John Playford's *Divisions on "Greensleeves"* are easily dispatched by Julie Andrijeski. The traditional and well-known Christmas folksong *Drive Cold winter Away* brings soprano and instrumentalists together for a rousing end of the segment.



A group of German *Weihnachtslieder* begins with the familiar *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* ("Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"). Cleveland poet Dave Lucas' *Three Kings* reflects how the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem changed them, echoing along the way some ideas of T.S. Eliot's inscrutable *The Journey of the Magi*.

Christian Geist's "mini-cantata" on the Lutheran chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* ("How Brightly Shines the Morning Star") is a high point of the concert. Mullins sings the unadorned chorale melody, soaring above the virtuosic instrumental accompaniment. The unison line was probably originally sung by a choir, so Mullins can be excused for needing to take a breath here and there in the very long chorale phrases.

The macaronic carol *In dulci jubilo*, in which German and Latin are combined in the stanzas (and also here, English and Latin), is indeed joyful in this performance by the entire ensemble. Texts for all the sung carols are available from the downloadable program page for the concert and appear as subtitles during the video. Alas, the poems are not available and do not appear, depriving us the opportunity of re-reading and reflecting on them. One hearing is not enough to savor their essence, especially for the new poems.

The last section of the program features more familiar carols. Gustav Holst's setting of Christina Rossetti's touching *In the Bleak Midwinter* is simply sung and accompanied

only by the small organ, at which Mark Edwards stands throughout the concert. *The Holly and the Ivy* also benefited from simplicity.

In a pre-concert video discussion among the poets and Debra Nagy, Julie Warther describes going to church on Christmas Eve, and everyone holding lighted candles during the singing of Franz Xaver Gruber's *Silent Night*. But at the end of the song, a small child wants to keep his candle lit. This memorable image forms the basis of Warther's poem *one child's candle* that fades into the instrumental introduction to the concert's finale, a quiet rendition of *Silent Night*. Perhaps the audience on Thursday wasn't singing along aloud, but at least one viewer was singing the words in his mind's ear.

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